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## **‘We are labeled as gang members, even though we are not’: belonging, aspirations and social mobility in Cartagena**

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## 'We are labeled as gang members, even though we are not': belonging, aspirations and social mobility in Cartagena

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores how belonging and aspirations interact to shape marginalized young Colombians' strategies for upward social mobility. Recent literature has argued that in the context of inequality and poverty, social mobility is constrained by people's inability to aspire to and/or achieve their aspirations. The majority of this literature is from the economics field and looks at the way poverty acts as a brake on social mobility. This paper provides an additional interdisciplinary analysis of the role of 'belonging' (to places and social class) in influencing aspirations of young Colombians. Findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork with young people from two marginalized neighborhoods in Cartagena. It is argued that aspirations are closely linked to belonging and the extent to which young people feel integral to or distanced from their localities. Using a Bourdieusian perspective, the paper examines how belonging is developed and how it influences behavior, orientations and future prospects. This approach generates insights into young people's apparent low aspirations beyond the explanation of internal behavioral poverty traps. In so doing, it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how societal structures limit aspiration development and achievement.

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### KEYWORDS

Belonging; aspirations; social mobility; young people; Colombia

### Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a growing body of literature in development studies, and development economics in particular, investigating the role of aspirations and their achievement in the context of inequality and poverty (Bernard, Dercon, and Seyoum 2011; Bernard and Taffesse 2014; Camfield et al. 2013; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016; Genicot and Ray 2009; Ibrahim 2011; Ray 2006; Copestake and Camfield 2010). The underlying argument of this literature is that people living in conditions of poverty, inequality and exclusion may not be able to aspire to and/or achieve their aspirations to generate upward social mobility (Flechtner 2017; Camfield et al. 2013; Copestake and Camfield 2010). Much of this literature highlights the role of internal constraints<sup>1</sup> in limiting people's ability to take advantage of opportunities and suggests these act as a behavioral poverty trap in perpetuating people's social conditions (Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016; Appadurai 2004). However, while greater attention to individual psychology within development studies has shown the importance of the ability to identify and achieve realistic aspirations in social mobility, it may divert attention from more structural factors.

This paper explores an additional and previously less-discussed area: how aspirations of young people are embedded in, and mediated through, the people and places featuring in their everyday lives. This approach, adds a relational perspective of place (Cummins et al. 2007; Massey 2009) to understanding aspiration development. In particular, it explores how a sense of belonging to their neighborhood and social class creates aspirations, and shapes young people's strategies to achieve upward social mobility. Social mobility is defined in this paper as people's upward and downward movement in relation to others within the same society with respect to status, economic resources and social class (Azevedo and Bouillon 2010; Gough 2008). This paper discusses this interrelationship of belonging, aspirations and social mobility using the example of young people from marginalized neighborhoods in Cartagena, Colombia. It combines theoretical approaches from sociology and human geography with development studies literature to argue that aspirations are influenced by a sense of belonging. The paper addresses the gap highlighted by Huijsmans et al. (2014, 1) that while young people are often included in development targets, they are still underrepresented in the theories

and practices of development. This is especially the case in research around young people's aspirations and/or social mobility in Latin America, albeit with some notable exceptions (Crivello 2011; 2015; Punch 2007; Azaola 2012; Gough and Franch 2005). This paper also responds to the call made by Hart (2016, 338) to work in a more interdisciplinary way to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the social context of aspirations.

## Background

The definition of aspirations ranges from goals and wants to future desires (Brown 2011; Ibrahim 2011; Prince 2014). Hart (2016, 326) describes aspirations as 'future oriented, driven by conscious and unconscious motivations and they are indicative of an individual or group's commitments towards a particular trajectory or end point'. This distinguishes aspirations from wishes or dreams through a commitment and development of strategies to achieve them. Ray (2006) states that the gap between aspirations and actual conditions affects future-oriented behavior; if it is too wide, aspirations are perceived as unreachable, but if it is too narrow, they may not be worth 'investing' in. More importantly, however, aspirations can be drivers of social mobility and act as motivation for people to alter their social condition (Appadurai 2004). Articulated in what Appadurai (2004, 67) calls the 'thick of social life', they are embedded in cultural, social, historical and political contexts, with their norms, behaviors and beliefs.

Young people's aspirations are closely connected to their everyday places and spaces and in particular to their neighborhoods and their relationships within them. According to Massey (2009), space is a dimension of multiplicity, and is always in the process of being made and produced through the establishment of relations in the sphere of daily life within spaces. Space is a product of relations that in turn are embedded in social practices, which have to be carried out. Space is never finalized but shaped through these relations. Consequently, spaces are also constantly connected to the future (Massey 2005, 9; 2009). This leads one to consider how young people are related to their everyday places and the relationships they have to and within places over time. Thus the notion of space focuses on people's *routes* within their everyday places rather than their *roots* (Massey 1998) and integrates this relational view of place and space. One important aspect of researching young people's aspirations and future social mobility is how place and the sense of belonging to them (or not) shape their imagined future selves (MacLeod 2009; Zipin et al. 2013; Kintrea, St Clair, and

Houston 2015). May (2013, 78) defines belonging as 'feeling at ease with oneself and one's social, cultural, and material contexts'. It allows one to feel comfortable and confident within spaces and places. This feeling of being comfortable and confident is further related to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which is a system of dispositions that provide one with the knowledge of norms and values of social spaces, in order to know how to move within them or to have what he calls 'a feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1993, 72). Prince (2014, 698) argues that the social environment is a crucial part of identity creation and that place-based experiences can influence the way young people see themselves in the future. Therefore, the interdependence of belonging to certain neighborhoods, groups of people and social backgrounds influences the way young people negotiate their future trajectories. Highlighting the interrelation between stigmatization, community networks and feelings of exclusion or belonging, therefore, is an approach that helps to make sense of the link between the self and place and how belonging influences young people's development and realization of aspirations.

## The research context

The data on which this article is based were collected in two marginalized neighborhoods in Cartagena, a city on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Cartagena consists of social contrasts, with its rich city center areas and poor suburbs around it. It is possible to speak of two Cartagenas: one which is wealthy, with colonial features and high apartment buildings along the sea in Bocagrande; and one which is poor, known as the *barrios populares*. Residents' income in the latter derives mostly from informal work and the majority of the population is of African descent. Households in Colombia are categorized within a stratification system, called '*estratos socioeconómicos*', or its short form '*estratos*'. This is an administrative categorization on a scale of one to six, with the wealthiest households assigned to '*estrato*' six, and the poorest ones assigned to '*estrato*' one. This system defines how much households pay for gas, water and electricity. The majority of Cartagena's households are classified as '*estrato*' one and two (CEDEC 2013) and they are located outside of the colonial center.

Cartagena, with its contrasting wealthy and poor neighborhoods located in close proximity to each other, is especially interesting when considering young people's sense of belonging. The neighborhoods this research focuses on are called 'Pozón' and 'La Popa'.<sup>2</sup> Pozón is an hour's bus ride away from the city center, which is the center for cultural events, shopping,

entertainment and historic sites. Pozón contains all the essential shopping facilities, including small food markets and clothing shops. Pozón is the biggest neighborhood in Cartagena with over 42,000 inhabitants (DANE 2016). There are several primary and secondary schools (11 in total) and one medical center (DANE 2016). However, Pozón has had the highest reported homicide rates in Cartagena every year since 2008 (Goyenche González, Pardo Gómez, and Mármol Pérez 2013; DANE 2016). Moreover, the local media has labeled Pozón as one of the city's most violent neighborhoods. Therefore, young people belonging to Pozón suffer stigmatization, in addition to economic hardship.<sup>3</sup>

La Popa is located next to the city center; beaches, the central market, the airport and other places that offer opportunities for work and education. La Popa has over 35,000 inhabitants in total (DANE 2016). However, like Pozón, La Popa suffers from violence and gang-related activities.

To explore young people's aspirations and how they pursue them, ethnographic and visual methods were combined with more conventional qualitative methods. Data were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews, focus groups and observations, as well as via participatory methods such as participatory photography and film-making. The study included 29 participants, aged 15–23, of which 16 took part in most of the research activities (although not all are represented in this paper). The study is biased towards male participants (as has been the case in other studies of youth in the Global South, see for example Weiss 2002; Vigh 2006) due to early withdrawal of female participants from the study. Exploring the reasons for this, and a gender analysis, are beyond the scope of this paper. Participants were recruited through personal contacts of NGOs in their neighborhoods and snowball sampling. Many of the participants were of African descent or mestizo, reflecting the population structure of the city at large, where inhabitants of richer areas are mostly white-skinned and inhabitants of poorer areas are mostly darker-skinned. Participant's names were changed to pseudonyms and consent was received in written form from adult participants and in addition from parents in the case of minors.

Interviews were conducted by the author and explored topics around young people's aspirations in terms of education, future occupation and desired future place of residence, as well as non-material wishes, such as a family. The transcribing of interviews and focus groups was verbatim in Spanish and later translated by the author, in order to retain original use of language and meaning. Focus group discussions covered topics of young people's definition of a good

life, and often shifted to existing inequalities such as unequal access to good-quality education. To provide more detailed information about the places and spaces the young people moved in day-to-day, the author provided participants with digital cameras, which they carried with them both day and night (where safe) to document their everyday places and spaces. Interviews were then conducted in order to understand the meaning of the photos. Management, coding and analysis of data was performed with NVivo and was guided by a thematic analysis approach open to emerging themes and topics (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). While this research covered a wide range of aspirations, including educational, occupational and family-related aspirations, these are not all discussed in this paper. The main focus of this paper is on the influence of place and how belonging to places influences young Colombians' aspirations to enter places and spaces that may lead to upward social mobility in the future.

## Belonging and aspirations

Belonging combines attachment to a geographical place (Relph 1976; Miller 2003) and social relationships within these places (Cuervo and Wyn 2014). Relph (1976) states that people give meaning to places over the time they spend in them, creating rootedness or attachment because of their experiences there. Similarly, Leach (2002, 286) states that a sense of belonging is created by moving through spaces and attaching meaning to them, while Tilley (1994) asserts that a sense of self is bound up with places and that these places become a crucial part of one's identity. Belonging, then, is a part of one's identity (Miller 2003, 217). Focusing on young people, Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue that belonging emphasizes the importance of the relationships between young people and the people that inhabit the social contexts they move in. Such relationships include ties to family, friends and neighbors, and may influence young people's future decisions in relation to place. More specifically, belonging to a place is linked to being known in a place and to having social capital (Visser, Bolt, and van Kempen 2015). This form of social capital is geographically bounded and creates social networks and access to resources that assist young people to achieve their imagined future selves (Carpiano 2006; Carpiano and Hystad 2011; Bebbington 2007; Portes 1998).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus assists in understanding how aspirations are influenced by belonging. Habitus is defined as 'a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception,

conception and action' (Bourdieu 2005, 43). Habitus describes the set of subconscious, internalized structures that generate behavior, beliefs, attitudes and tastes; and determines how, in a way appropriate to their social class, a person thinks and acts. Habitus includes both the influences of external structures and agency in generating strategies towards individual 'interests'; or, as in this research, aspirations that reflect what seems appropriate or possible for individuals in their social spaces (Swartz 1997, 100). In spaces where people's habitus corresponds with their social surroundings, they feel at ease; that is, they have a sense of belonging as they know what to do, how and when (Bourdieu 1977; May 2013). Additionally, a sense of belonging can maintain social order. Bourdieu (1989, 17) asserts: 'It is this sense of one's place which in interaction, leads people [...] to keep their common place, and the others to "keep their distance", to "maintain their rank", and to "not get familiar".'

Bourdieu's notion of sense of place describes a tendency for people to remain in places that correspond with their habitus due to feelings of belonging. People with similar systems of dispositions tend to inhabit geographical places close to each other and avoid those places that require a different habitus (Bourdieu 1989, 17). This reinforces class systems, and leads to the exclusion of people from classes that do *not* 'belong' to them (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1989). A sense of belonging is therefore created not only through a feeling of similarity but also through a sense of dissimilarity and the feeling of *not* belonging (Marzi 2015). In a society with a class system, such as that in Cartagena, not everyone is 'allowed' to belong in certain places and spaces. Exclusion is reinforced through labeling people and creating a system of stigmatization by ascribing negative characteristics to them. For instance, labeling a neighborhood of Cartagena as particularly violent stigmatizes the people living in it.

With respect to aspirations, a sense of belonging may affect young people in different ways. On the one hand, it can provide them with a feeling of safety and comfort. On the other hand, it can constrain their social and spatial mobility. There are therefore opposing influences of positive feelings, being a trigger for aspirations, and a behavioral trap due to negative feelings of exclusion and stigmatization.

### Exclusion, stigmatization and not belonging

The majority of young people in Cartagena's *barrios populares* have never lived in any area of the city other than their own neighborhoods. They know exactly where their friends live, who their neighbors are, and

the quickest ways to get to places. They have long-lasting relationships with their neighbors and other young people living close by. Neither La Popa nor Pozón are without problems, however. Both neighborhoods have security problems, but the media stigmatizes Pozón more than La Popa. The media presents Pozón as the most violent *barrio popular* in the city. City council reports confirm this judgment, indicating that Pozón has the highest homicide rates of all Cartagena's *barrios populares* (Goyenche González, Pardo Gómez, and Mármol Pérez 2013). La Popa is well known for gang activity as well, but homicide rates are much lower than in Pozón, and the area receives less coverage in the media. La Popa is more affected by small robberies and muggings than serious crimes such as homicides.

Media discourse on crime in these areas affects the aspirations of young people and prompts them to avoid spaces and places that contain groups of people or social classes different to their own. James (21, Pozón)<sup>4</sup> talked about his experiences at university:

At university it is a bit complicated and sometimes I felt ashamed to say where I was from. When I told my friends where I was from and where I spent my free time, some of them looked at me differently. [...] There exist many prejudices.

James experienced how the labeling of a neighborhood can translate into the stereotyping of young people. This stereotyping can create feelings of shame and emotional vulnerability. In some cases, this can have significant influence on young people's choices, and constrain their aspiration achievement: young people self-protect and do not take advantage of certain opportunities that become available to them (Stahl 2015). Low (2009) states that places and spaces are always embodied, a notion that is closely linked to Bourdieu's concept of habitus and how the structures of spaces are internalized into habitus. However, it also refers to an internalization of place attachment, which is linked to the representation of a place in relation to other places. There can thus be tension from belonging to a place that is negatively compared, stereotyped and stigmatized in relation to others (Prince 2014, 698). James, however, contested the stereotypes and stigmatization. He studied at a private university and was reluctant to embody the stigmas of his neighborhood as he tried to follow his chosen pathway towards fulfilling his aspirations. He was aware of how Pozón was labeled and the challenges he faced because he was from there:

There are many prejudices. Sometimes because here [in Pozón] they murdered someone, they think we are all murderers. Or they think we are drug addicts and thieves because this happens here. Just for living here



they think you are this. However, sometimes when I say I am from Pozón they don't believe me that I am.

His last sentence alludes to the fact that once his peers had the chance to get to know him, James transformed their image of him, challenging the structures that had constrained him initially and building new social capital in the form of friendships with students from richer backgrounds. Being at a private university, predominated by students from higher social classes, can be intimidating for students from lower-class neighborhoods. The stigmatization that can result from belonging to Pozón can transform into a behavioral trap and limit the aspirations of young people. In this case, however, James overcame his fears of stigmatization and managed to build friendships at university with students from other areas of the city. Security issues, poverty and discrimination are forces that have an impact on young people and their aspirations as they negotiate their sense of belonging and compare the social representation of their neighborhood with that of others (Prince 2014).

Young people in La Popa experience similar challenges to their peers in Pozón. This is largely because the labeling of one *barrio popular* affects all of them. *Barrios populares* suffer from more crime and social problems compared to richer *barrios*. In itself, the categorization of neighborhoods into *barrios populares* and *barrios*<sup>5</sup> generates stigmas. Many negative, intersecting factors are attached to *barrios populares* but not to all neighborhoods classified as *barrios*. Some of the most important of these intersecting factors are crime rates, the poverty level and the race of inhabitants. Hannes (18, La Popa) explained:

Just because you are from one of the stigmatized barrios, they say what [kind of] person you are and they do not give you the opportunity to get to know them and they you, even though they are so often wrong in their perception.

Hannes explained how certain, often intersecting, characteristics are assigned to people from *barrios populares*, constraining their opportunities or power to alter this image. Being labeled in this way creates an impression amongst the young people that they can do nothing to contest the images that are attached to them. This can, in turn, lead them to avoid certain places, for fear of experiencing exclusion. For example, Santiago (19, Pozón) explained how Cartagena is divided by a class culture. In contrast to James, he was afraid of entering private university, as he believed that the people from higher social classes look down on people from *barrios populares*; he was afraid of experiencing this kind of exclusion and stigmatization.

At university or at work maybe, people like us have this exclusion in society because people are not used to see[ing] the bad things we are living in. Here it is normal, sure. So now that they have decided Pozón is very dangerous. If I want to enter a private university, well, there where the rich families send their kids, well, they look down on us. And when someone tries to find work and has his or her education, the companies also look down on you. [...] there are dangerous *barrios*, I admit that, but sometimes the media and the people say things that are not true. I mean, I am not defending the bad things happening here – the *barrio* is dangerous and actually I do not much like living here – but it is also not as dangerous as they say in the media.

Santiago and Hannes demonstrated how they are negotiating the stigmas that are involved in belonging to a *barrio popular*. They were aware of the judgments made about them as residents of a neighborhood that is considered violent and dangerous. Both young people linked the stigma they live with to the discourse about their neighborhood and, even though they admitted that their neighborhood is dangerous and complicated, they argued that the discourse about their neighborhoods is exaggerated.

Katia (17, Pozón) further explained how people from *barrios populares* are perceived when entering the spaces of richer social classes, such as the *barrio* of Bocagrande. Being from a *barrio popular*, and of darker skin color, is directly related to danger and other 'bad' characteristics, while a white person is perceived as safe and 'good'.

We have a lot of racism here in Cartagena. For example, a white guy running is doing exercise but a black guy running has been robbing someone. Also, they see a black guy smoking a cigarette and they think he is a gang member, while if it is a white guy smoking he is doing nothing.

Katia's explanation of life in the city illustrates that in contemporary Cartagena people of color rarely belong to upper-class neighborhoods and that they are perceived as dangerous and criminal. JD (18), from La Popa, described a similar experience.

One time we were walking in these *barrios* [rich neighborhoods] and as the police were there they saw us and because of our skin color and how we were dressed they thought we were gang members or something like that. Therefore, they told us to leave ... and they almost took us [into custody].

Discrimination in Cartagena is connected to skin color. The police JD met did not know anything more about him than the fact that he was of color and not dressed in any expensive clothes, which was apparently enough to ask him to leave the predominantly white area. Other young people expressed similar stories: that

they were denied access to discotheques in the city center or had problems in richer parts of the city with the police and inhabitants. They were perceived as dangerous because of their appearance, their skin color and their clothes, even though they have no affiliation to gangs. These stories show that the way people dress is a part of their habitus, and support the argument Bourdieu (1989) made that habitus creates social class differences. People who belong to different classes are separated in a hierarchy of belonging where only those with the 'correct' habitus are allowed to belong to the dominant class. This spatial exclusion and discrimination has consequences for young people's futures and aspirations. While most of the universities are based in rich areas, and workplaces are dominated by people from richer parts of the city, young people may be in danger of being excluded from life chances connected to these institutions or may exclude themselves because they want to protect themselves from emotional harm. In this way, the stigmatization of young people is linked to their belonging to *barrios populares*, supporting Bourdieu's 'sense of place', that creates a hierarchy of belonging and *not* belonging, linked to particular aspects of a person's identity (Bourdieu 1989; Gale and Parker 2015). This sense of belonging, once internalized into a young person's habitus, can act as a behavioral trap, having a negative impact on their imagined future selves (Appadurai 2004; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016). An example of this was given by Santiago who expressed fear of social and emotional consequences if he were to enter university (above).

However, young people also exhibited a significant degree of agency by resisting media discourses and countering their stigmatization. They distanced themselves and their significant relationships within the *barrio popular* from violent and illegal activities and from the stigma related to them. They expressed a sense of belonging to their area but not to the aspects of it they regard as being negative.

### Social networks and 'being known'

Notwithstanding that the media stereotypes *barrios populares* as violent places in an exaggerated way, violence and crime do take place regularly in *barrios populares*. Miguel (17) explained that while media reports of Pozón are exaggerated, its problems are real. He admitted it would be dangerous for a person to enter the neighborhood if they were not known there.

Maybe if I were from Manga [a rich *barrio*], not for any price would I come here to Pozón ... We are labeled

as gang members, like a dangerous *barrio*, even though we are not. Maybe a bit but not as much as they say.

Like the youth that featured in a study by Visser, Bolt, and van Kempen (2015) in Rotterdam, the young people in Cartagena were aware of the security problems in their neighborhood, and were used to the stigma of being from a dangerous place. One way they counteracted this stigma was by emphasizing that there were good and bad sectors within the neighborhood, highlighting their own living spaces as good sectors. James said:

It is a quiet [i.e. safe] sector in comparison to the rest of the *barrio*. Maybe the sectors that are more distant [...] they are a bit more insecure. I don't say it is great to live here but nothing has ever happened here. [...] there are, like in every *barrio*, problems because of poverty but it is quite safe.

As well as separating the neighborhood into safe and unsafe sectors, like James, and distancing himself from the dangerous zones, Hannes also elaborated on the importance of social networks. He lived in a dangerous neighborhood but knowing the people around him provided him with safety.

Well, it is perceived as a dangerous neighborhood where I live. There are gangs and all that stuff. You know that here you get to know the bad things but [there are] also good things here. For example, my neighbors; we grew up together. Therefore, there do not exist any rivalries or things like that. We treat them like family and they us as well. Like cousins and brothers – you know what I mean? Therefore, there always has been trust between us.

Hannes was aware of the problems in his *barrio*: 'gangs and all that stuff'. But he shifted the focus to the kinds of relationships people have with each other. In referencing this social network of trust, Hannes draws attention to the fact that people belonging to it are perceived as 'good' people and they regard each other as family. For example, by comparing them to cousins and brothers, which demonstrates the affection and trust that exist between them. Hannes was thus able to create a distinction between the 'bad', the gangs; and the 'good', his neighbors and family who are social capital resources of reciprocal trust and provide a sense of belonging (Reynolds 2013). However, these networks are not only important for the young people as ways in which they can distance themselves from 'bad things' and fight their own stigmatization. These networks are, more importantly, safety networks that guarantee spatial mobility within the *barrio*. Lenard (19, La Popa) described his neighborhood in the following way:



It is a *barrio popular* and it is characterized in the universal form, like one of the *barrios* that are dangerous because of people who are in gangs, because of the drugs that the [young people in gangs] sell and take.

Lenard, like Hannes, explained that his neighborhood has problems with gangs and drugs. He also said that these are the kinds of problems all *barrios populares* have – they are universal. He went on to explain that he had been able to create a safety network for himself because he had lived there for a long time: ‘Yes, I can walk freely because they know me and they know where I live. I have lived here for many years so they do not get involved with me or make any problems or any of this ...’ Thus being known means being safe, and belonging to a place provides the social network to live and move safely in it (Visser, Bolt, and van Kempen 2015). The trust networks the young people describe in Pozón and La Popa are typical of all the *barrios populares* in Cartagena, and probably of many other *barrios* in poorer regions of Latin America (see for example Perlman 2003, 2010).

The link between being known and safety has been observed in others parts of the world. Reay and Lucey (2000) illustrate a similar point, describing how children in deprived areas of Britain feel that being known is a crucial part of negotiating life in their neighborhood. Like the young people in Cartagena they create contrasts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, as well as ‘us’ and ‘them’, stating that nothing could happen to them in their area, as they are known there. In contrast, Miguel recalled the following experience, which took place when he visited another neighborhood, where he was not known:

I don’t know how it is in Manga or Bocagrande but if you enter Olaya and you are not from there it is very likely that you will get robbed. In Olaya they took my cell phone from me. It was a drunk person and he had nothing left [no money] to drink more so he told me to give him my cell phone. The people at the supermarket all saw that but [they did] nothing.

Miguel was not known in Olaya, a *barrio popular* near Pozón, and was thus without a social network providing him with safety. This highlights the negative effect of social capital, where the same ties that benefit members of a social network, in this case safety benefits, can have negative consequences for those that are excluded from it (Portes 1998).

The feeling of being known and the benefits of being a member of a social network are connected to belonging. It provides the young people of both La Popa and Pozón with the ability to move comfortably and freely through their *barrio*, something they would not have if they lived in other parts of the city. Young people

expressed this aspect of belonging in their aspirations for the future with regards to living in a different kind of neighborhood later in life. There was a balance between young people who wanted to do so and those who expressed a preference for staying where they were. Many of the latter also expressed the wish for change in their own neighborhoods and said they hoped that living conditions might improve without their having to move. Miguel, for example, spoke highly of his neighborhood, Pozón, and even though he was aware of the problems the neighborhood had in terms of violence and crime, he believed that in the future it would become a center of commerce that would provide many opportunities for the people living there.

Pozón is a neighborhood in progress. I look at this neighborhood like a visionary and think Pozón will be a commercial center in the future. It has problems such as crime and gangs but this will go by. [...] At this moment it is not the best neighborhood but life is not bad here. One has to learn to love one’s land. There are other neighborhoods, like Los Alpes, San Fernando and Manga, and they live well with their luxury but one is getting used to how things work here where one is born and learns not to feel bad about it.

Other young people were not so optimistic, and simply highlighted the advantages they perceived of living in their *barrio*. For example, for Jessi (19, La Popa), it would be best to live in La Popa in the future because of its location within the city and proximity to social mobility opportunities:

Well I have family who live in different parts of Cartagena. And in all neighborhoods it is the same. But I think because of convenience [...] I would stay here because it is close to the center. Many things change. One may move to a safer neighborhood but it is more distant [from the city center].

Karla from Pozón, on the other hand, highlighted the relationships in the community as the reason she liked to live in the *barrio popular* Pozón. She did not consider Pozón’s distance from the city center to be a problem:

I like to live here. I like the people here. Yes, you see fights and it can be difficult to live here but I like my neighborhood and the distance to the center does not bother me. At least there is a bus that takes you everywhere.

The young people did not think their homes in these neighborhoods were necessarily the best place to begin life from, but some felt that they had grown to belong there; as Miguel said, they had become attached to the place and used to the social conditions there. While James said that he appreciated the community spirit of

people in his neighborhood and the support he got from them, he also admitted that he aspired to live in another *barrio*.

Yeah, I would like to leave this neighborhood and live maybe where my grandparents and uncles live. It is a better neighborhood. I don't say I want to live in Bocagrande because this would be too much to ask for but if I were given the opportunity I would do it. Even though in this sector here is not so much violence, in general there is in the neighborhood, and I don't want my brother growing up here in this [...] I also would like to live in Getsemani. It is a *barrio popular* but has a lot of culture and history which I like [...] However, the most important thing is to live in a quiet and safe place in the future, [...] although I would never forget my neighborhood and would come back and visit.

James argued that he could feel at ease in other *barrios* as well, as long as they had similar structures to his own. His statements demonstrate the discrepancy between his feeling of belonging in Pozón, and the feeling that, perhaps, he should leave people behind to move to a safer and quieter life in another *barrio*. His description of possible places to live in the future also demonstrated a sense of belonging to a wider culture of *barrios populares* in the city. He stated clearly that he aspires to live in a safe place; he would want to know his family would be safe. He also mentioned that he would consider living in Bocagrande, but immediately, even before finishing his sentence, suggested that this would be too much to expect. Bocagrande is a rich *barrio*, with high apartment buildings, and people living there are predominantly of lighter skin color. Bocagrande requires a different habitus to the one James has cultivated living in Pozón. James' sense of belonging as part of his habitus creates a distance between himself and other social classes. In other words, habitus provides the young people with a sense of where they belong but also, as Bourdieu (1989) argues, tells them simultaneously where they do *not* belong. James, for example, felt strongly that he did not belong in Bocagrande and felt that to aspire to live there was too much to expect, even though that area might provide more social mobility opportunities. This relates to what Miguel argued, namely that one has to learn to love their neighborhood and get used to living there. Miguel and James' statements imply that their sense of belonging limits their aspirations; they seem to feel that there is little option but to live where they belong.

Similarly to James, JD said he would like to live in a bigger house and in a good, safe and quiet place, like the area close to the beach. He lives in La Popa with four siblings and his parents in a two-bedroom house. However, his desire for a big house was not

accompanied by a desire to live in richer areas of the city where the bigger houses in Cartagena are located.

JD: Well, yes I like to live in a big house but not in these places.

Interviewer: Why?

JD: I don't know. It does not attract me completely. If I had the opportunity I would like to live in a house like this big but ... like I like it [...] I mean more than anything the way of how people live with each other is important. Those people [rich people] don't have this cultural identity ... I mean more than anything it is this, the cultural identity that is missing. Apart from this what interests me most is living in a quiet place; thus, if I had the opportunity to have a house and live quietly [in the sense of not being noisy but also being safe] there I would go.

JD explained how important his cultural identity was to him; being from a *barrio popular* and living within its social structures mattered to him. It was the knowledge of these structures, ways of living together in a community that provided JD and many of the other young people in this study with a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging influenced their social aspirations regarding where to live in the future as much as material considerations like the idea of simply being able to live in a bigger house.

The various statements the young people made showed how belonging can make it difficult for them to imagine and negotiate where to live in the future. As Relph (1976) argues, the neighborhood is the young people's 'home': where they have their roots and relationships to significant others. While they had different ideas about their current neighborhoods and about staying in or leaving them, all the young Cartagenians preferred the idea of living in similar cultural and structural environments to the ones they had grown up in. They preferred the structures of *barrios populares*, where community is important and associated social capital provides safety.

## Concluding remarks

This paper provides new insights into the understanding of the social context of aspirations in development studies. It does so by exploring young Colombians' aspirations through an interdisciplinary lens and in particular through analyzing how belonging affects their aspirations and strategies towards social mobility. This article highlights the understanding of belonging in close interrelationship with habitus, and Bourdieu's

‘sense of place’. This acts as a mechanism distinguishing those who belong and those who do not, according to intersecting characteristics such as social class, race and neighborhood.

The discussion of the young Colombians’ sense of belonging to their neighborhood and relationships within them emphasizes that aspirations and strategies to achieve them can be enabled and/or constrained by both external and internal factors. Belonging to *barrios populares* causes the young people of La Popa and Pozón to experience exclusion in terms of Bourdieu’s (1989) ‘sense of place’, a hierarchy of belonging and *not* belonging, linked to a person’s habitus and place. Yet, rather than aspirations being the cause of exclusion, this research showed that if young people develop low aspirations of spatial mobility these result from exclusion, discrimination and cultural structures. Young people did experience exclusion from spaces and places of higher social classes based on their appearance or place they belong to, namely their neighborhood and more importantly the perception of this as being violent. For some of the young people this limited their aspirations; in particular, they may feel disinclined to enter higher education, especially private higher education. In turn, this means they might not be able to take advantage of the social mobility opportunities they offer. This agrees with Dalton, Ghosal, Mani (2016) and their statement that low aspirations and related behavioral poverty traps are a consequence of poverty and not the other way around. However, young people also actively challenged these societal inequalities and discrimination by exhibiting a significant degree of agency, resisting media discourses and countering their stigmatization. They distanced themselves and their significant relationships from violent and illegal activities; and stressed how belonging to one’s ‘good’ neighborhood provides them with a safety network of reciprocal trust and emotional support. Safety and the ability to move around easily are important contributing factors to young people’s confidence in themselves and their futures. The idea of living in *barrios* where structures are different and neighbors may not know each other was not appealing to the young people in this study and was not part of their ‘aspirations window’, although they recognized that people from richer *barrios* had more opportunities for social mobility. Both aspects – the active challenging of inequalities, and the importance of aspirations that go beyond material factors, such as safety and community relationships – are still underrepresented in the literature regarding aspirations in developmental studies. However, they play an important role with respect to strategies towards social mobility, at least for the young people in this study. One could argue that this

paper describes examples of ‘belonging’ limiting young people’s aspirations, resulting in a behavioral poverty trap, or limited aspiration window whereby moving or commuting to richer neighborhoods can be seen as an unreachable goal, so that young people adapt their aspirations accordingly. Yet the young people of this study did not show signs of low aspirations. On the contrary, they reflected critically on their social conditions and the social structures that excluded them from spaces and places of higher social classes. Thus, moving to better areas may translate into less material hardship for young people, but if that means losing the safety and emotional comfort provided by their social networks, this could be an undesirable tradeoff for them.

There were certain limitations within this study that pinpoint promising areas for future research. In light of Colombia’s reputation for cultures of ‘machismo’, a gender analysis could draw out connections between social class, race and gender and their influence on a sense of youth belonging and aspirations. Building on the findings presented here, further analysis of youth social networks from different theoretical perspectives could deepen understanding of the complex, differing and perhaps conflicting influences on young Colombians’ aspirations and their achievements.

## Notes

1. Internal constraints refer to the inability to aspire to higher social mobility outcomes here.
2. The name La Popa is not an official name but one used by the author as a term for a group of several smaller neighborhoods.
3. The young people of this study have not been affiliated with gangs or taken part in any criminal activities
4. (age, neighborhood) of participant
5. Richer neighborhoods are just called *barrios*, while the word *popular* classifies a neighborhood as poor and of lower socioeconomic background.

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